



The Westminster Pulpit

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“Stumbling into Righteousness” **Sermon on Matthew 3:13-17**

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Baptism of the Lord

We were standing at the River Jordan a month ago. The Sunday of the second Advent candle. We gathered around the Word, and the word was John the Baptist shouting in the wilderness, “Repent, for the Kingdom of heaven has come near!”

“Then all the people from Jerusalem and all of Judea were coming to be baptized confessing their sins.” Even the Pharisees and Sadducees came, and John said, “You brood of vipers who warned you to flee from the wrath that is to come! Bear fruit worthy of repentance! For there is one who is coming, why, I can’t even touch his sandals. He’s going to come and baptize with the holy Spirit and fire!”

Do you remember that?

Well, since that December Sunday, we have come to know this one John talked about. In a few chapters, Matthew has called him many names. Matthew has said his name is Jesus. Matthew says he’s the Messiah, the son of King David, the son of the father of Abraham, the child of Mary, the offspring of the Holy Spirit, the one who will save his people from their sin. Matthew has called him Emmanuel, God with us. Herod called him “The King of the Jews.” He is the one who “hails from Galilee.” He is the Nazarene. These are the names we have heard for Jesus since December, when we were at the river. A lot has taken place. Today we are back at the river Jordan.

I’d like you to open your pew Bibles to New Testament, page 3 and keep your Bible open.

Matthew 3:13-17

Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. John would have prevented him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?"

But Jesus answered him, "Let it be so now, for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness." Then he consented.

And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw God's Spirit descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from the heavens said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

What I want you to see is that it was a month of Sundays since we were in the River Jordan listening to John the Baptist, "Repent, the Kingdom of God has come near." Since that time, the third and fourth candles were lit, and then "Joy to the World, the Lord is come!" We've had the visitation of the Magi. We've had the flight to Egypt. Over the last four weeks, we have gained a few pounds, opened presents, and watched football games, that once proud Christmas trees became dead carcasses on the side of the road. The credit card statement has arrived, detailing how we lost our minds and wallets.

A lot has transpired since we heard John in the wilderness one month ago.

The baby is all grown up, and today he's at the Jordan River.

That feels about right. We're ready to move on!

But, if you notice in your Bible, John the Baptist preaching about the "ax laid at the root of the tree, wasn't four weeks ago. It was just the verse before all that we just read. Nowhere in verse 12 is it cited: "The reader should pause a month, before reading any further." I want you to be aware of the movement. The Baptist is preaching fire and brimstone! And Jesus interrupts this "wrath that is to come" by making the river walk. You know how it is when you can see the bottom, just kind of one foot, "Whoa, about slipped there."

It's a jarring transition! We've gone from a rip-roaring Baptist convention with an altar call, which is turned it into a meeting of the Presbytery. "The next order of business on our docket is, we are going to have a baptism by John in the Jordan. Is there any discussion?"

That once roaring Baptist turns his back to the people and whispers to Jesus, "What are you doing here? If anything, I'm supposed to be baptized by you."

And Jesus says, "Let it be so now, for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness." And, for those of you taking notes, this is what is called conducting business "decently and in order," and that is how we know Jesus was and is a Presbyterian.

"Decently and in order." Anyone opposed? Hearing none, so ordered.

What happened to all the fire? What happened to "I'm not worthy to touch this one?" What John thought was coming isn't what shows up!

Matthew has this lesson for us. The Messiah is always a surprise, surprise, surprise, surprise! We'll hear it through this gospel. Sheep and goats will both say, "When we did we see you hungry, thirsty, naked, and in prison...?" Surprise, surprise, surprise. "As you did it unto the least of these, you did it unto me." The one we crucify is the one who saves! Surprise, surprise, surprise!

Matthew says to us, "When you let your theology get in the way of Jesus, you'll be surprised."

Well, John agrees to the baptism process. (You can close your Bibles now.) And when Jesus comes up from the water, the Spirit descends, not with fire, surprise! But ever so gently like a dove.

You can miss gently. Instead of laying on the horn at the one who cut her off, she just rolled her eyes and kept going. No one is going to see it, no one is going to hear it. Gentle.

It's third and long, and gentle is the last leaf falling from the oak tree. Been up in that tree since April 3rd, decided to come down on January 11th. God saw it gently land. Gently. Gentle is the sound of the spider's feet climbing ever so quietly up your shoe. Sorry, bad illustration, but you get my point. If you're not paying attention, you can miss the righteousness of God. It's not an ax, not a winnowing fork, not fire, it's like a dove.

But then, we have the voice of God. "This is my son, my beloved, in whom I am well pleased." We could use a little voice of God rumbling in this world. Some power from above to shake people out of wrong belief, warring madness, sickening bloodshed, hatred, and division. We could use some divine voice, splitting the darkness with light!

But I don't know how loud the voice of God was, because it didn't seem to register in the ear of John, because if it did, John would have known not to say to Jesus, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?"

I think what Matthew is doing is trying to balance the divinity of Jesus with the humanity of Jesus. That's not easy!

I can't ever get my head around someone being both human and divine. Can you imagine being fully divine and fully human? If I were fully divine, oh, you'd know it! I wouldn't need committees or the Presbytery or the Book of Order! I'd be Rev. Frank Sinatra Drake - "I'll do it MY way!"

Even if I were 99 percent human and one percent God, I'd probably really lean into that God thing! I'd use it for only the most important things, like making that putt for the win! I'm just going to lean into that divinity.

I can't get my head around it. Paul says, "Jesus, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited." I don't know how he did it, but I need Jesus to be fully human when he decided to head down to the Jordan to begin his ministry. I'd like Jesus not to be driven by God into the waters of baptism, but more like us, who stumble upon righteousness. I've got to do this because I'm God, but maybe his human ears heard the cries of the people, and he said to himself, "I think I can help!" "I think I can speak to that!"

I think I'd like to invite people to be the light of the world.

I'd like to invite people to see their enemies as made in the image of God.

I'd like them to pray for their enemy!

I'd like to invite people to let go of their need to win, win, win, win, and be reconciled.

I don't know how all that's going to go over. I hope they accept it. I want to give my life's work for that. I hope God will be pleased. And he untied the strings of the carpenter's apron and went down to the Jordan. I need Jesus to be more like us.

I can't get my head around fully divine and fully human! John wanted powerful God and got gentle Jesus. Such are the waters of Baptism.

We talked about this on Friday in Bible study. Chad Folk shared that this time of year brings back memories of when his mother was murdered by her husband, Joe. A complete shock.

If you're talking human, that's as low as it goes. Jesus talks about praying for your enemy and reconciling with your brother. Seems to me, in some this circumstance one would need to be divine to do that. I don't think I'd have it in me.

Chad said, he has spent the last year cleaning out his mother's home, and all the stuff that went into the dumpsters. One thing he didn't throw away was a piece of paper. He held it up for us. Chad said he stumbled upon Joe's Certificate of Baptism. It was quite clear to me that this wasn't a human stumble for Chad, but a divine one.

I suppose anyone else who had lost their mother to such cruelty would see the discovery of the murderer's Certificate of Baptism as a sign of great irony! But Chad shared that he can see a long-ago mother and father bringing that baby, Joe, to the waters of Baptism, and receive the sacrament. "Here is our gift! Here is our little Joe, an offering of Thanksgiving." And in that long-ago church, the presence of Jesus and the Holy Spirit, were there, ever so gently!

Chad has this holy belief that in Baptism, God claims us, and "that there is nothing we can do to make God love us anymore, and there's nothing we can do to make God love us any less."

I can't get my head around it. Chad is working to get his head around it. Reconciling anger, rage, the sadness in his heart, to this Amazing Grace. It isn't easy when you're human. And if you could, you'd look for something else. But what you get is Jesus.

"This is my son, my beloved, in whom I am well pleased."

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